

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

April 27, 2006

BALLONA WETLANDS

File No. 04-088

Project Manager: Mary Small

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$100,000 to the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority to implement interim stewardship activities at the Ballona Wetlands, Los Angeles.

LOCATION: West of Lincoln Boulevard and south of the Marina del Rey along the Ballona Creek Channel in Los Angeles County. A portion of the project is in the City of Los Angeles and a portion is in unincorporated Los Angeles County (Exhibits 1 & 2).

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Coastal Resource Enhancement and Public Access

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location Map

Exhibit 2: Project Area and Watershed Map

Exhibit 3: Letter of Support

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31251-31270 and 31400 et seq. of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed one hundred thousand dollars (\$100,000) to the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) to implement interim stewardship activities to protect and enhance the Ballona Wetlands, subject to the condition that prior to disbursement of funds, the Conservancy’s Executive Officer shall approve MRCA’s work plan and budget for that work.”

Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project authorization is consistent with Public Resources Code Sections 31251-31270, Coastal Resource Enhancement Projects.

2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
 3. The project serves greater than local need.”
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

This authorization would provide funding to the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) to help implement interim stewardship activities to protect and enhance the Ballona Wetlands. MRCA would provide rangers capable of enforcing local and state laws to protect the resources of the site and help ensure the success of restoration enhancement activities. This authorization will provide funds for part time ranger services for up to three years. The MRCA also has experience combining community outreach and interpretive programs with its ranger program. Tailored to the specifics of the site, this programming may include ranger reports at community meetings, junior ranger programs and support of the on-going site clean ups.

In fall 2004, the Conservancy, the Department of Fish and Game (DFG), and the State Lands Commission (SLC) initiated a public planning process to engage trustee agencies, local government, nongovernmental organizations, and the public. There is a long history of conflict over this site and many agencies and organizations have an interest in the planning process. The Conservancy staffs the planning process. In 2005, the Interim Stewardship and Access Management Plan was completed to guide access, restoration and educational opportunities while the long-term restoration plan is developed. The purpose of this authorization is to provide resources to help implement that plan and protect the resources of the site while the long-term project is developed.

The Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) is a local government entity established in 1985 pursuant to the Joint Powers Act. The MRCA is a partnership between the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, which is a state agency, and the Conejo Recreation and Park District and the Rancho Simi Recreation and Park District both of which are local park agencies established by the vote of the people in those communities. The MRCA is dedicated to the preservation and management of local open space and parkland, watershed lands, trails, and wildlife habitat. The MRCA manages and provides ranger services for almost 50,000 acres of public lands and parks that it owns and that are owned by the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy or other agencies and provides comprehensive education and interpretation programs for the public.

Site Description:

The historic wetland complex at the mouth of Ballona Creek probably occupied about 2000-acres. Much of that area has been developed. The State of California now owns 600-acres of the former wetland complex. The Department of Fish and Game owns 540 acres, and that land was purchased with funds provided from the Conservancy to the Wildlife Conservation Board. The State Lands Commission owns 60-acres, including a newly created freshwater marsh and adjacent vacant land. All of the DFG property and a portion of the SLC property is part of the Ballona Wetlands Ecological Reserve, designated by the Fish and Game Commission last fall.

Despite the degradation of site resources, significant wetland habitat remains within the Ballona Wetlands. Plant species within the project site include wetland indicators such as pickleweed, marsh heather, saltgrass, arrowgrass and glasswort, and a variety of upland and exotic species including brome, iceplant, oxalis, and ryegrass. Bird surveys indicate that the site is used seasonally by a variety of migratory shorebirds, as well as by typical shoreline residents (gulls, terns, and ducks) and typical upland birds including small raptors. Bird species of special interest observed in the project area include nesting pairs of Belding's Savannah sparrow and foraging use by California least terns.

Project History:

There have been more than twenty years of intense conflict about land use at this site. Several development proposals and regulatory approvals have resulted in litigation, some of which continues today. In 2001, the Trust for Public Land entered into a purchase agreement with Playa Capital Company, the former landowner. Through this purchase agreement, the Department of Fish and Game ultimately took title to 540 acres of the property during the past year. The Conservancy provided \$10 million for that acquisition.

The Conservancy has long supported enhancement and public access at the Ballona Wetlands. The first Conservancy project at this site was a 1986 grant to the National Audubon Society for environmental education facility associated with a proposed site restoration. That project was never implemented due to the ongoing conflicts about development at the site. Beginning in the late 1980s, the Conservancy provided funding for planning and implementation of enhancements to the nearby Ballona Lagoon and holds easements for resource enhancement over much of the land bordering the Lagoon.

In December 2004, the Conservancy authorized funds for development of restoration alternatives and implementation of interim stewardship activities. A consultant team is developing a conceptual restoration plan. The California Conservation Corps will begin implementing the Interim Stewardship and Access Management Plan this spring. This authorization will complement those activities. Restoration planning for the site will take a minimum of three years. Staff anticipates returning to the Conservancy for authorization to complete this analysis once a preferred alternative has been selected.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Proposition 12, Coastal Conservancy	<u>\$100,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$100,000

The Conservancy funding would be derived from an appropriation of funds specifically designated for the acquisition, protection and enhancement of the Ballona Wetlands in the 2000 park bond, Proposition 12. Public Resources Code Section 5096.352(f) provides that \$25 million is available to the Conservancy for this purpose.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

This project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 6 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Public Resources Code Sections 31251-31270, Coastal Resource Enhancement Projects. The

project would enhance the natural and scenic character of resources within the coastal zone. As discussed below, consistent with Section 31252, the project is consistent with the policies and objectives of Division 20 of the Public Resources Code.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S
STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 5 Objective A** of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan, the proposed project would help the Conservancy to restore and enhance up to 600 acres of coastal wetland and adjacent habitat. When implemented, this project will complete 60% of the total acreage target for Southern California.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S
PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** There is broad public support for developing a restoration plan for this site. This project is supported by the Department of Fish and Game, a letter of support is attached as Exhibit 4.
4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of Los Angeles County.
5. **Need:** Conservancy funds are needed to provide resources to fund MRCA participation. The need for rangers on site has been repeatedly identified by stakeholders as a priority.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The proposed project will help advance the largest coastal wetland restoration project in Los Angeles County. The site provides habitat for threatened and endangered species, including the Belding's savannah sparrow and the California brown pelican. The site also provides valuable and scenic open space and public access opportunities in the heart of congested Los Angeles County.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** More than 98% of the coastal wetlands in the Southern California bight have been destroyed or degraded. This project offers an opportunity to restore and enhance 600 acres of habitat.
8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** Restoration of the Ballona Wetlands will address a number of goals, including: enhancement of wetland and adjacent habitat, and creation of compatible public access opportunities.

9. **Readiness:** MRCA will begin work immediately; other interim stewardship activities are beginning this spring, so this work needs to begin simultaneously.
10. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** “See “Project History” above.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

In the late 1980s, the California Coastal Commission certified two separate Land Use Plans that covered this project area. No Local Coastal Program was ever completed for the Ballona Wetlands area and the two Land Use Plans are now out of date. However the proposed project is consistent with the policies of the Coastal Act. The project goals are consistent with the Coastal Act goals as stated in Section 30001.5, the project will protect, enhance and restore the natural resources of the site and expand public recreational opportunities consistent with conservation of those resources. Specifically, Section 30231 states that coastal wetlands shall be maintained and restored. The project is consistent with Section 30240(a), in that it will help ensure that environmentally sensitive habitat areas are protected against significant disruption of habitat values. As stated in Section 30251, the project will protect the scenic resources and open space of the project site.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PLAN/ STATE WATER QUALITY CONTROL PLAN:

A Watershed Management Plan for the Ballona Creek Watershed was completed by an interagency/stakeholder task force this year. The purpose of the plan is to identify opportunities to improve water quality and restore habitat. The restoration of the Ballona Wetlands is specifically identified as a priority activity in the watershed.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

This project will implement interim stewardship improvements. The interim stewardship activities were analyzed under CEQA by the Conservancy in its December 2004 authorization and found to be categorically exempt under 14 CCR Section 15304. A Notice of Exemption was filed on December 28, 2004.